

Nevada County musician takes talents to Utah's Place



Learning how to play the guitar may not seem like a top priority for a homeless person who typically needs shelter and sustenance, first and foremost.

But, as longtime Nevada County musician and guitar teacher Kelly Fleming tells it, music may be a key need for soul survival – once the physical needs are addressed.

“There are needs beyond the physical that are also important,” said Fleming, 56, of Nevada City, who plans to start teaching guitar lessons to guests at Utah’s Place, the homeless shelter in Grass Valley.

“This (guitar lessons) is another manifestation that there are things beyond the physical that deserve recognition.”

Nowhere would a music program for an underserved population be more appropriate than Utah’s Place, the 54-bed facility opened about six months ago by Hospitality House and named for the iconic Nevada County folksinger Utah Phillips. Phillips, the late husband of Hospitality House co-founder and development director Joanna Robinson, was dedicated to social activism.

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Kelly Fleming

“I feel his spirit as a guiding light,” said Robinson, who married Phillips in 1989 in Nevada City. “He was so real, so engaged, so intelligent.”

Fleming, not coincidentally, was a close friend of Phillips, who died on May 23, 2008 at the age of 73. The two met just before Phillips moved to Nevada County from Spokane in about 1986.

“I think of him every day,” Fleming said. “This place (Utah’s Place) was a dream of his.”

Fleming, a full-time guitar teacher and musician who is a regular performer at Friar Tuck’s and Matteo’s in Nevada City, and at Tofanelli’s in Grass Valley, also teaches guitar every Monday to inmates at Folsom Prison.

“I think (Phillips) would like the idea that more music is being brought into this place,” Fleming said of Hospitality House, which has already hosted several concerts and performances. “Making music accessible to residents – I think he would like that.”

Robinson said the guitar lessons will be added to Utah’s Place growing roster of programs to enhance guests’ self-esteem and enrich their lives. Other programs already in place are a “Healing from Homelessness” class taught by Hospitality House Executive Director Cindy Maple, and a new six-week culinary job skills training class taught by newly hired kitchen manager Jeff Olson.

“Sometimes homeless people don’t even realize they are worthy of having a home,” Robinson said. “Everybody is precious, everybody has a past and a future, and homelessness does not define a person.”

Robinson said Fleming’s classes will start as soon as Hospitality House is able to collect enough donated guitars. To donate an in-house guitar to the program, contact Robinson at 530-615-0852.

Robinson and Pinky Zalkin, assistant development director for Hospitality House, are also seeking additional loans to pay down debt on renovations done on the building to create Utah’s Place.

The agency, which previously had been a nomadic operation moving from night-to-night in a rotation among local churches and social agencies, bought the property with a \$1 million federal grant, and then received a \$346,000 private loan to renovate the building.

Of the \$346,000, about \$88,000 remains to be paid off, Robinson and Zalkin said.

They have restructured the former two-year private loan into a series of smaller, five-year loans, of which two, \$25,000 loans have already been secured.

“We’re now looking for a \$38,000 loan,” Robinson said.

Fleming, meanwhile, said he continues to be inspired by his late friend Phillips.

“He never shirked from any reality,” Fleming said. “Through his music and his personality, he demonstrated a kind of moral compass.”

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